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Turning Your Avocation Into Your Vocation

Career opportunities in recreational scuba diving

Have you ever thought about making the ocean your office? You dream of working as a tour guide on a remote Caribbean island, diving in crystal-clear waters, and instructing to make your living. If you want to pursue a career in the recreational dive industry, there are many options open to you, but first you must decide which field of endeavor best suits you. Do you want employment at a retail diving facility, on a cruise ship, or living at a resort?



Having been an instructor trainer for 10 years, and a placement director for several of those years, I've had the opportunity to develop a perspective on the conceptions and misconceptions concerning careers in the dive industry. The most critical aspect of developing and maintaining a successful career is realizing that you must put your goals into perspective. You must find out how to best prepare for a dive career, decide what type of employment you are seeking, and learn which options offer the salary and compensation you expect.

Many times when applying for a job you are told, "I'm sorry, but you don't have enough experience." This frustrating statement leads to the age-old question, "How can I get experience when I can't get a job?" Diving is one of the few industries where a newly certified instructor can find employment with relative ease. Even if you are a recent high school or college graduate with little real-world experience except school, there are positions available. And any additional training and experience you have can significantly enhance your earning potential.

Many people get their start by selling equipment and assisting with classes. Dive stores often hire certified divers to fill positions. Working in a store is an excellent way to learn about the industry and plan which career path to take.

If you decide to make diving a full-time career, you'll soon learn that becoming an instructor is a prerequisite. There are few quality positions available for you unless you obtain this important certification. Because of the nature of the business, it's not economically practical for employers to hire someone who is not an instructor. Why have one person as a divemaster/tour guide and another teaching when one instructor can fill both positions? Employers cannot afford to offer competitive salaries if they hire two people to fill what amounts to one position. Also, to meet facility insurance requirements, or even to obtain work permits in most resort areas, you must be an instructor. Instructor training is available through all certifying agencies.

Specialty training is becoming increasingly popular. Today's diver wants to learn more about the activity, and resorts, stores, and live-aboard find training these "student" divers an excellent source of income. Every instructor should take the necessary steps to become a specialty instructor. Popular courses include underwater photography, deep diving, night diving, underwater video, multilevel or computer-assisted diving, wreck diving, and equipment specialist.

Because of the increasing awareness in marine ecology, underwater naturalist or marine life identification courses are highly sought after programs. In fact, cruise ships and several resorts require that instructors be able to identify various types of marine life for customers. Ecology training also enables the divemaster to give briefings that make customers aware of how their interaction affects the reef.

Since diving is an equipment-intensive sport, anyone who understands and can repair equipment is highly prized by employers. Unfortunately, most instructors and divemasters have no knowledge of equipment repair. Don't confuse maintenance with repair; they are two entirely different skills. A repair technician can dismantle, clean, reassemble, and adjust a regulator to factory specifications in approximately one hour. Anyone with this skill should expect, and demand, higher pay.

Most diving facilities have a store and sell equipment. Sales experience is extremely beneficial, and sales commissions are usually offered in addition to salary or hourly pay. By understanding the basic marketing principles, your take-home pay can be greatly enhanced. Seminars specifically geared to dive retail are offered by many of the training agencies and manufacturers. Knowing how to sell your classes is an extremely valuable skill. Sales training is important to resorts, facilities, and live-aboards alike.

What would you do if the resort owner asked you to captain the boat? It's common for employers to expect dive instructors to wear two hats: instructor and captain. The ability to get the boat to the dive site and back safely is an important skill employers request when they are looking for new employees. A captain's license will enable you to make several thousand dollars more per year than someone without this certification.

A few instructor training facilities offer special resort training. Many schools are currently offering these specialized courses. The curriculum differs within each school and within each program, and courses require anywhere from four to 10 days of training.

These programs are designed to shorten the learning process and get new employees functioning faster. For instance, learning to properly check a compressor's fluid levels is an essential skill. There's nothing worse than being responsible for a "meltdown" because you didn't know how to check the oil before turning on the compressor. These programs also address basic boat skills and resort instruction. According to industry experts, graduates of resort training courses can earn \$2,000 to \$3,000 a year more than other

instructors.

Other areas enhancing hirability are hotel training, management, advertising or marketing, public relations, computer skills, and experience in other watersports activities. Another skill that is extremely beneficial is the ability to speak foreign languages. Hawaii and the Pacific areas need instructors who can speak Japanese. Those who can speak French, Dutch, Spanish, German, and Portuguese are important to employers in the Caribbean and Central and South America.

AREAS OF EMPLOYMENT

Resorts

Several instructors want to work at a tropical resort. Resort responsibilities include conducting underwater tours, completing referrals (students referred by dive centers to the resort for completion of the Open Water portion of their training), maintaining equipment, and instruction. Advanced and specialty training are becoming increasingly popular with traveling divers, but the majority of resort training is the introductory "scuba experience" class. People experiencing the underwater world for the first time are an instructional challenge. One goes west, one north, another is off chasing fish. Teaching a resort course safely is hard work, but nothing is more of an ego-builder than turning someone on to an activity you enjoy so much.

Salaries and benefits vary. Many offer salary plus commissions on classes or sales. Not all offer housing, and when they do, salary is usually lower than at resorts with no housing benefits. In the end, they usually balance out to about the same. Some facilities offer health and life insurance benefits, and the average starting salary in "paradise" ranges from \$12,000 to \$18,000 per year.

This salary doesn't include tips, which are handled in a variety of ways. Some resorts have a tipping pool that's split between the staff. Others believe each individual is entitled to the rewards they earn. Public relations are critical in any aspect of resort work, and taking the time to interact with customers really pays off. "My staff makes sure all the divers have a good time," says Marcus Johnston of Cruz Bay Watersports. "As a result, they make almost as much in tips as they do in salary."

When you work in a foreign country, you are required to carry a job permit, which is usually obtained by the facility for which you'll be working. Because it's harder to get permits for families, most facilities prefer to deal with single or married applicants without children. Some resorts pay the fees up front as part of your contract, and some split the cost of the permit with you. Make sure when you are interviewing for a position that you understand who is paying for work permits.

There are some disadvantages to living in "paradise." The work is hard, the hours long and the cost of living can be high. When you work as a dive instructor, you are expected to provide a professional service for your clients. You can have a great time while you work, but you must always remember that the customers, not you, are the ones on vacation.

Retail dive stores

If you really want to teach everything from open-water through a variety of specialties, work in a mainland dive store because they train the majority of the divers. In addition to instructing, you'll be responsible for sales, rentals, air fills, and maintaining equipment. In most instances, you'll get the opportunity to gain valuable experience in dive travel. Stores usually offer some type of travel service, and your expertise as an instructor makes you a

prime candidate to lead groups on these excursions.

Sales experience is a plus at a retail store, but so is learning about and understanding the dive business. According to Teresa Lang of Diver's Den, which has three south Florida locations, "It's important for the staff to have a working knowledge of simple business procedures. They need to know how to fill out sales receipts and rental forms, book charters, and talk intelligently on the telephone."

Retail salaries vary from \$15,000 to \$25,000 and usually include base salary, sales commission, and class fees. Some stores provide the latest dive equipment at no charge and rotate it on a constant basis so their students always see the instructor in "state-of-the-art" products. Advancement can be rapid as many stores promote from within. If your ultimate goal is a management position in the dive industry, a retail facility is your best choice. Management salaries vary, but can range from \$22,000 to \$35,000.

Cruise lines

Cruise ships offer excellent potential to career-minded divers. The job entails supervising snorkeling and water sports activities, captaining a rescue boat, and even developing slide or video presentations about marine life for the passengers. But the water-related activities are only about half of the work you'll be doing. A dive instructor is also expected to organize social activities, spice up ship-board parties, make social presentations, and oftentimes, if qualified, participate as a member of the ship's medical staff. Even though you may not be actively involved in teaching diving, many curious tourists are interested in seeing what's under water, and you'll be in charge of providing them with a proper introduction to the undersea world.

Travel-oriented, outgoing dive instructors usually like the opportunities provided by cruise ship life. According to Royal Caribbean Cruises, Ltd., "Salary, employee benefits, and advancement are outstanding. We offer an excellent base pay, commissions, room and board, uniforms, and medical benefits." Starting pay averages between \$13,000 and \$20,000, and management positions, \$25,000 to \$33,000 a year, are filled by promoting staff members.

Because you're supervising large groups, water and lifesaving skills are of extreme importance. To gain employment on a cruise ship, you'll be expected to pass a physical fitness and watermanship test. A Seaman's Visa is also required for non-U.S. citizens without a "Green Card."

Live-aboard dive boats

Another way to enjoy cruising and still be able to teach diving is to seek employment on a live-aboard dive boat. Because of the limited number of available jobs, most employers prefer hiring an experienced instructor. You'll also need instructor credentials in several specialty areas with underwater photography and video experience being a definite plus. Salary is usually determined by your level of expertise and includes room and board.

Other areas of employment

Sometimes extensive experience in one aspect of recreational diving can branch into another career. Divemasters proficient in photography or videography have started their own businesses. Most specialize in underwater films and pictures of customers, but many also shoot pictures for brochures and advertisements. Instructors or divemasters with boating experience have purchased their own boats and offer charter dive excursions. Equipment repair is another career option.

Selling dive travel is another area of opportunity. Most employers require travel agent

experience because of the licensing required by many states and countries, but many will provide on-the-job training while you earn your credentials.

For those of you with imagination, the sky is the limit. Some creative divers have made a living by scrubbing boat bottoms in the local marina while others have made a healthy living by diving for golf balls at the local golf course.

PART-TIME EMPLOYMENT

Approximately 25 percent of each year's instructor graduates earn their certification to produce extra income or enhance their diving experience. The most common type of employment is teaching evening classes for dive stores or community service courses for colleges and universities. This approach makes it possible to continue your primary career and still fulfill your passion for scuba instruction.

Summer employment opportunities are available with employers such as ActionQuest of Sarasota, Fla., and SeaCamp in Big Pine Key, Fla. Several part-time instructors teach specialty courses in conjunction with dive trips so they can travel to resort destinations they might otherwise never see. What better way to enjoy a dive vacation than to be paid to teach and dive — the two reasons you became an instructor in the first place.

OTHER CONSIDERATIONS

When considering a recreational diving career, it's important to remember that the diving industry is a business. Like any other business, it's a job and you are expected to perform as a professional. Sure, you go diving and teach classes, but you're also responsible for cleaning the boat, filling tanks, stocking shelves, selling equipment, booking charters, selling dive travel, repairing and maintaining equipment I could go on, but my computer would run out of memory.

Many facilities want young instructors they can train in retail scuba sales who will stay with them and develop their career. But age is not a barrier to obtaining work as a dive instructor. Maturity combined with training you might have received in your previous occupation, such as sales management, will always prove an asset.

Instructors with families find retail facilities to be their best means of employment. Florida, Hawaii, and the U.S. Virgin Islands are excellent choices for U.S. citizens seeking a resort location with the "stateside" conveniences a family requires. It's possible to obtain employment in remote countries, but immigration procedures are complicated and require extended waiting times.

A proper resume is a must. Remember the old adage about first impressions? Well, a resume' is your first introduction to a prospective employer. Be concise. Most employers don't like resumes longer than one page unless they are hunting for management. Pictures should accompany all resumes. When you have your photograph taken, avoid using laminated film (the lamination tends to separate). Passport-size pictures of your "smiling" face in either black and white or color are adequate. In many cases, especially with resort locations, your resume' and a telephone interview are your ticket to a new career.

It takes drive and dedication to become a professional. Whether you're female or male, there are positions available around the world in every facet of recreational diving. With proper training and clear goals, it's possible to achieve lucrative employment in the recreational dive industry.